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KING: With August 28 and October 10 being suggested now as possible election dates, let's head inside Canberra.

Dr Craig Emerson is the Small Business Minister in the Gillard Ministry. Senator George Brandis is the Opposition Attorney General in Tony Abbott's Opposition Coalition.

Good morning gentlemen.

EMERSON: And it's hello to you, Madonna and hello, George.

BRANDIS: Morning, Craig.

KING: Now Julia Gillard - they say a week's a long time in politics - neither of you predicted last time we'd be talking about this a week later.

EMERSON: That's true I didn't, it all emerged on Wednesday night and that's...

KING: It did.

EMERSON: when it started, and then it was settled on Thursday morning.

KING: Julia Gillard talks of a government that had lost its way, but she was the person who wanted Kevin Rudd to dump the emissions trading scheme, something that was pretty costly to him. It's a new Deputy, Wayne Swan, who's been the one arguing strongly

over the mining tax. Craig Emerson first, isn't she as responsible for the government losing its way as Kevin Rudd was?

EMERSON: Well, Kevin was the Prime Minister but Julia has certainly said that she accepts her fair share of responsibility for errors or mistakes made. But also for the achievements that have been made since the election of this government a couple of years ago.

KING: We know all that. We know that because she said that. But given that she was the one who wanted to dump the emissions trading scheme and her new Deputy has been the one fighting for the mining tax, the question is: isn't she as responsible for the government losing its way as the former leader Kevin Rudd?

EMERSON: Well, she bears a proportionate responsibility for the mistakes that have been made and the ...

BRANDIS: [Laughs]

EMERSON: George, what's the suggestion? That Julia's responsible for all errors and not responsible for any of the achievements? That would be a Liberal perspective, but it's not correct.

KING: No, but she said the government had lost its way. So isn't it fair then to analyse from that or take from that the perception being then, that she's as responsible for it losing its way?

EMERSON: Well, let's talk about the mining tax. Julia wasn't involved in the formulation and the handling of that matter and, obviously, it was affecting our standing in the community.

Julia is moving quickly to seek to resolve that in a more amicable way, in a negotiated way. Kevin was doing some good work there. But Julia is now seeking to resolve this to the satisfaction, if not the joyous agreement, of all parties.

KING: Alright, Senator George Brandis, then. Certainly Julia Gillard looks as though she has offered something new into the leadership of the ALP if you look at the polls and the response, George Brandis.

BRANDIS: There's always going to be a bit of a bounce because of the wow factor, if only because it's the first female Prime Minister, but can I...

KING: But people don't usually - really - change their vote based on the fact that it's a female.

BRANDIS: Not many have, but there's been a slight increase of about two or three per cent in the Labor vote, that was predictable. But can

I - I just can't let something Craig said a moment ago, Madonna, go unresponded to.

We just heard enunciated on your program a new constitutional doctrine and that's the doctrine of proportionate ministerial responsibility when Craig said Ms Gillard bears a proportion of the responsibility.

No, she doesn't, Craig, no she doesn't. She was the Deputy Prime Minister of this government. She was one of the central Ministers, the so-called gang of four. She, like all senior Ministers, bears entire responsibility for all shortcomings of the government.

KING: Alright, let's come to who she is, and I might start with you George Brandis. Your dealings with Julia Gillard, paint us a picture. She's obviously a very good communicator, very articulate, is able to sell a message strongly.

BRANDIS: Look, I don't know her particularly well. I don't know her as well as Craig knows her. But my sense of Ms Gillard is that she is a very single-minded and ruthless person. If you look at her professional background rising as she did through the hard left in student politics and going straight into the industrial side of the Labor movement through practising industrial law. Then making a figure of herself in the socialist left faction of the Victorian ALP and fighting the tribal wars with people like Lindsay Tanner and Kim Carr and those Melbourne socialist left branches of the ALP. Then getting a pre-selection, rising fairly rapidly through the ranks and then being one of the people responsible for the clinical political execution of Kevin Rudd, she is a very single minded and ruthless person.

KING: And isn't that an attribute when you describe a man?

BRANDIS: Well, I don't - you asked me what my sense of her was and that's what my sense of her is. I don't think she's a very multi-faceted person. I don't think there's much to Julia Gillard beyond the sheer clinical political ruthlessness.

KING: Alright, let's let Dr Craig Emerson have a go here, and Craig Emerson you used to actually go out with Julia Gillard, didn't you?

EMERSON: Yes, I did, for several years.

KING: For several years. Well you might be able to actually explain to us the Julia Gillard that you know.

EMERSON: Yes, she's certainly not the one that George presents to your listeners; some sort of ruthless, hard, socialist left person who

now has got a bounce because she's a female. I mean, I just think that is very old-school, blokey, sexist trash.

KING: Well you went out with her you said for several years. Just describe the Julia Gillard you know.

EMERSON: She has a great sense of humour and she is very engaging with people and this will actually translate into a very important strength as Prime Minister. By engaging, I mean that she identifies the talents - the various talents that people have, whether it's experience, technical expertise, just some sort of sense of wisdom and she draws on that. She asks them for their views.

They all feel that they're part of the show, which is an important attribute, and then she makes decisions based on that. I think that is a real strength. And if I could draw a comparison there, Madonna, Bob Hawke was very much like this.

He had ideas of his own but he liked testing those ideas and welcoming alternative ideas and evaluating them as a very confident person would and then coming to a conclusion. I think that is a very healthy attribute of a Prime Minister. And it is, by the way, one of the reasons that she was so popular in the party room.

KING: You broke up. She must have some bad habits.

EMERSON: Well, maybe I did [laughs].

KING: Oh, have you? I don't want this to pass before putting it to you honestly: is it true you actually drank her contact lens in a glass of water on one occasion?

EMERSON: That's true. It was two o'clock in the morning and she had told me be very careful about the glass of water in the bathroom because it's got her contact lenses. That's what she told me before I went to bed.

KING: You should learn to listen.

EMERSON: Then I woke up and I was a bit thirsty and I saw the glass, drank it and then went uh-oh. But now I do have the benefit of hindsight.

KING: Okay. Now onto something that was an issue yesterday, that she doesn't believe in God. Was that a risk saying that, Senator George Brandis, or do you actually give her a pat on the back for being brave enough to say that when there's a fairly strong Christian lobby in Australia.

BRANDIS: Look, she's an atheist and she was asked about that and she was frank about it. I don't think she'd be the first atheist Prime Minister of Australia. To the best of my recollection Mr Whitlam professed no religious belief. I remember he once memorably said, years ago, that he thought he and God were generally heading in the same direction. But most Australians are people of religious faith. I don't think they'd hold it against someone that they're an atheist. But I think there's a deeper issue with Ms Gillard and that's the point Mr Hockey was making yesterday. I don't think she's a very ethical person. I mean I really don't. I mean she...

KING: Well why, give us an example of that...

BRANDIS: Let me tell you why I say that. No politician that I can think of in Australian history has been so emphatic that under no circumstances would she attempt to dislodge a leader from - a leader who was running into political trouble - from office.

KING: But things change.

BRANDIS: No, no, look, everybody in Canberra knows that Julia Gillard was part of this and yet she was staring at TV cameras and saying there is more chance of me flying to the moon and back than replacing Kevin Rudd. There was more chance of me being the full forward of the Bulldogs than replacing Kevin Rudd. Yet we now know that she was up to her ears, while she was saying these things, plotting to displace him. So I don't think she's an ethical person.

KING: Craig Emerson, a right of reply there.

EMERSON: In fact she was not plotting at all. What the Labor party was confronted with is the prospect, declared in fact by Tony Abbott, that the Coalition was within grasp of a 'famous victory', which he confirmed subsequently on The 7.30 Report, despite about 15 MPs saying that he never said it. That would have meant bringing back WorkChoices and the withdrawal of important services for people and in those circumstances, and in those circumstances...

BRANDIS: You know when Craig's losing the argument when he brings up Work Choices...

EMERSON: Well I'll go to it many, many times ...

BRANDIS: I know, because you don't have a feather to fly with Craig.

EMERSON: Because the Australian people know that Tony Abbott had said that only the word WorkChoices is dead. Now the point I'm

making is that this happened late. Julia was not involved in any destabilisation.

KING: Okay.

EMERSON: There was a ...

BRANDIS: Come on, I mean nobody...

EMERSON: George, can I just get a word in or do you want to give a speech?

KING: Yes, go on Craig Emerson.

EMERSON: Could you give George a Mogadon or some sort of tranquilizer?

KING: I've turned off his mike, but he's...

EMERSON: Good on you, good on you.

KING: I think...

EMERSON: I wish I could turn off his mike!

KING: I think you've made your point there though, Craig Emerson. Can we move on a little bit? One thing she has done in the last 24 hours, and she's due up here again tonight I think for a \$5500 a head dinner, but last night she flew up in the government jet for an ALP function I understand. I wonder if you think should she be doing that or should she be only using the government jet for official government functions. Are there rules and regulations about that?

EMERSON: There are rules and regulations and they've been observed in this case and they've been observed by previous Prime Ministers, including John Howard. Look the function would have been pre-arranged. It wasn't sort of arranged on the spot once Julia became Prime Minister.

She has been working in Canberra, as you know, on the mining tax and other matters. She wanted to honour that commitment. She did honour that commitment and now she's still working on the mining tax and other issues...

KING: I'm not making...

EMERSON: Policy issues.

KING: And this is a political point because as you say, John Howard presumably did the same thing. But there's no differentiation between a party function and a government function, is that right?

EMERSON: Oh, well, certainly I know this and that is that there are rules and that in doing this Julia complied by the rules. They're established not just for Prime Ministers but, just incidentally, for Governors-General and other people who have access to the aircraft fleet.

KING: This cost issue has come up a couple of times this morning and also in relation to Kevin Rudd. Alan from Ipswich says how much do our former Prime Ministers cost us? There should be a limit on how long they get these benefits, and that's in relation to a report this morning on Kevin Rudd and what he will get for superannuation for life and the like.

Wendy from Tarragindi says will Kevin Rudd be entitled to the Prime Ministerial benefits as well as normal parliamentary benefits while he is still an MP? Anyone know the answer to that question?

BRANDIS: I think he probably is. There have been instances of this before on both sides of politics. Mr Whitlam stayed in Parliament after he ceased to be Prime Minister. Mr Gorton was a Minister, after he was Prime Minister: he was Minister of Defence for about eight months in the McMahon Government and Sir William McMahon himself stayed in Parliament for many years after he lost the 1972 election.

KING: If you're a Prime Minister and you lose - and eventually you lose - whether it's John Howard, Paul Keating, Kevin Rudd; you get an office in the city, you get a car, you get business flights each year, you get staff, don't you, for the rest of your life.

BRANDIS: I think the arrangements for former Prime Ministers and former Governor-Generals is that they're entitled to a maintained office, to two staff, to use of Commonwealth cars, I think that's a - and then they get whatever position they're entitled to...

EMERSON: Limited travel I think, with some entitlements.

KING: Do they still get security, presumably?

BRANDIS: I don't think so.

KING: Do either of you think it's unusual that Julia Gillard has decided not to move into the Lodge? Does that provide a security issue, George Brandis?

BRANDIS: Well, look, I think this is a bit of political stunt, frankly, to try and burnish her image as somebody who isn't other than what she is, that is a single minded, ruthless, political assassin. So look, you know, there are security issues about any Prime Minister - the last Prime Minister not to live in the Lodge was Ben Chifley.

But I don't think he drank anybody's contact lenses at the Currajong Hotel.

KING: That's thrown you, hasn't it?

EMERSON: It's got him going, hasn't it?

KING: Certainly has, look onto the issue of polls. Now if we can just not play a political game for a couple of minutes. But Craig Emerson, you always say to me, look Madonna, I'm not poll-driven. We don't respond to polls and George Brandis you're no better. You've always said the same.

But isn't what's happened, as evidenced by the fact that the new Prime Minister says the government's losing its way, isn't this all in response to polling that shows that perhaps the government has lost its way.

EMERSON: Maybe I can clarify, Madonna.

KING: Yeah, sure.

EMERSON: What I've been trying to say and maybe not as eloquently as I should, is that particularly in an election year, there's going to be polls out every second day. We could spend all our time diagnosing those polls, analysing and dissecting them and my point is that we've got to get on with the job of government and do as best we can to govern in the national interest.

But that doesn't mean that political parties pay no regard to private and public opinion polling. Of course, both political parties do that, even the Greens do that. They'd probably tell you they never would in a month of Sundays.

KING: So you're saying it was this continual trend that was frightening.

EMERSON: Well, certainly the prospect of Tony Abbott becoming the Prime Minister is a prospect that frightened us, and should frankly frighten the Australian people. They will get an opportunity to make a decision on WorkChoices in due course.

KING: Alright, I was talking about polls and still on that, on the latest Newspoll, is my reading correct though that Julia Gillard's appointment has drawn back votes from the Greens not from the Coalition? Who'd like to address that one? George Brandis?

BRANDIS: Well that's, that is the case and let me sort of put in my usual caveat about not extrapolating too far from one opinion poll, but it is interesting that the primary vote of the Coalition hasn't shifted up or down as a result of Ms Gillard's installation as Prime Minister.

The Labor Party was bleeding very heavily in the direction of the Greens in particular, and a lot of those Green primary votes seem to have gone back to the Labor Party, which suggests that the people who are rather attracted to the idea of voting for the Greens may be attracted to the idea of Ms Gillard.

But, the fundamental political architecture - if I can put it that way - between Labor and non-Labor hasn't changed very much. To be blunt with you, as a matter of fact Madonna, it hasn't changed as much as I expected it would in the first post-change poll.

KING: Alright, Craig Emerson, you're happy there? We can move on to the next issue?

EMERSON: Look I think so. I reckon there's been about five polls out. There's you know polls on television stations, radio stations, newspapers, State polls...

KING: Yeah, but there's a difference isn't there? There's a difference...

EMERSON: Well actually I think they're quite diverse in their findings and it's just the season for polls. It's a way of generating a news story - I'm not criticising media outlets for doing them.

KING: And I suspect with the smell of an election in the air...

EMERSON: ...there will be more.

KING: ...there will be more, not less. Just...

EMERSON: A poll a day.

KING: Just briefly on population. We talked yesterday a little bit about population and Julia Gillard's warning that we shouldn't hurtle towards a Big Australia. It was Treasury that predicted 36 million by 2050 based on current growth predictions.

I'm just wondering where you both stand on this issue of what is a Big Australia and what should we be looking at here? George Brandis.

BRANDIS: Well, the Coalition has always been much more sceptical than the Labor Party about uncontrolled population growth. And when Mr Rudd said that he thought 36 million within half a generation's time was right and then there was a - the Rudd Government now the Gillard Government put out this Treasury report you've referred to, which predicted I think it was 45 million...

KING: Treasury predicted 36 million.

BRANDIS: No there was another report that predicted 45 million...

KING: Right.

BRANDIS: ...that was put out by this government. And the Liberal Party has always said we're very uncomfortable with that. And Ms Gillard, at the time, as Deputy Prime Minister in that government, didn't say a word.

KING: Alright, but moving forward, in terms of your being very uncomfortable with that, do you have a view in the Coalition on where you would cap that population? Is it asylum seekers, business migrants?

BRANDIS: We wouldn't - we're not talking about it in terms of population caps, but we think 36 million is way too big.

KING: But that's based on natural growth patterns, so...

BRANDIS: No, no it's not. The largest element of - there are two elements. One is migration intake...

KING: Yes.

BRANDIS: ...and the other is natural growth pattern.

KING: Yes.

BRANDIS: Now obviously you don't cap natural growth. So, the way in which you have the biggest influence on the size of the population is by varying the migrant intake year to year.

KING: And the...

BRANDIS: And the migrant intake is far too high at the moment.

KING: So it's 250,000 I think - 13,000 refugees of that 250,000.

BRANDIS: The migrant intake at the moment - and Scott Morrison our spokesman has said this time and again, as has Tony Abbott - is far too high at the moment.

KING: Alright. Craig Emerson do you want to add to that at all?

EMERSON: Absolutely I do. The 36 million was a projection. It's not a government policy.

BRANDIS: No that's not true. Rudd said...

KING: It is; it is a projection on...

EMERSON: It's a projection from the inter-generation...

BRANDIS: ...embraced it.

EMERSON: In the inter-generational report it is a projection and...

KING: Yes, I can confirm that.

EMERSON: ...and, the immigration assumption in that is the immigration level that corresponds to that of the previous Howard Government. So let's get a bit of honesty into this debate George. We believe in a sustainable Australia. We believe that there will be population growth and anyone who thinks that there won't is kidding you. George is not quite saying that...

KING: Alright, but I'm asking you for your view. I've asked him for his view. What is your view here?

EMERSON: I think we need a manageable immigration program, not too large. This is simply...

KING: So you're arguing the same thing.

EMERSON: Yeah, well, I believe in an immigration program. George is just saying it's got to be cut back very severely. What I'm saying is that the projections of 36 million are based on Howard Government immigration program figures.

Now, if George is saying that they made a mistake for 12 years, come forward and be honest George.

KING: Alright, let's move on from the population.

BRANDIS: That's in fact not what I'm saying and the point you keep running away from Craig is that Mr Rudd, Ms Gillard beside him not uttering a word of difference, adopted that figure.

KING: But in fairness, can I just say, because I researched this yesterday, it was a Treasury prediction based on current growth.

BRANDIS: Correct.

KING: Alright, well let's just move on. I wanted to get to the mining tax, but we won't have time. I just wanted to speak to you about Kevin Rudd for one moment - Craig Emerson, have you spoken to him since he was sacked?

EMERSON: Yes I have, but I have to clear up this last point - Tony Abbott embraced the big Australia concept on 25 January of this year. Now let's...

KING: Alright, let's move on from population.

EMERSON: ...let's move on.

KING: Kevin Rudd - when did you speak to him?

EMERSON: I spoke to him after the Caucus meeting. I sat with him for a time. Obviously he was upset. This is a very upsetting and difficult time for Kevin and his family.

KING: Spoken to him since?

EMERSON: No, I have exchanged a couple of messages with him since then and no doubt I'll give him a ring in the next couple of days. But I just thought that he should be given a bit of time to settle down with his family. He's moved out of The Lodge, as you say in your introduction.

KING: He's out and about in his electorate this morning.

EMERSON: And he's out and about in the electorate, yeah.

KING: Doing a bit of electioneering.

EMERSON: So I just didn't feel that I should just ring in on a, you know, sort of half daily basis.

KING: Alright.

BRANDIS: Well look, can I, Craig, say this - and I'd like to pay a tribute to Craig here - Craig at least had the courage to go on Sky News on the morning of the Caucus meeting - oh sorry, on your program was it? I'm sorry Madonna. I beg your pardon.

KING: Corrected that one upfront [laughs].

BRANDIS: Well no, I think he was on Sky News as well, which is where I saw it, but, on the morning of the ballot - there wasn't a ballot of course...

KING: Yes.

BRANDIS: ...but on the morning of the decision and publicly support Mr Rudd when everybody knew that Mr Rudd's death warrant had been signed by the faceless members. So I think that showed courage, if I may say so Craig.

KING: Alright, can I say, ask this though as a final question - in 10 years, when the three of us are sitting around this table, George you've got...

EMERSON: And we're in our early 50s.

KING: ...you've got - well, I will be.

EMERSON: Not you. Not you.

KING: Yes, thank you.

EMERSON: Oh no, no, I'm mainly speaking for me. I'm stopping the clock.

KING: And George Brandis will have less hair. Mine will be more grey.

EMERSON: And mine will be grey.

KING: How will history paint Kevin Rudd? Like, what will they say? Was it a fly-by-night Prime Minister who was in for five minutes? Will he be looked at better in the light of history, George Brandis?

BRANDIS: I think that he will not. I don't think that history will record this as a very successful government. I'm not being party political here. That's my honest view. Because what Mr Rudd represented himself to be - that is a fiscal conservative - is not what he was.

He - basically - you see I don't think in 2007 people wanted a fundamentally different government. They were weary of John Howard. They still respected him but they were weary of him. They wanted the same government with a younger leader and that's what Rudd presented himself as being and what they got was something very different.

KING: Alright, Craig Emerson, in the history book in 10 years what will be written about this period as Kevin Rudd as leader or Kevin Rudd specifically?

EMERSON: Obviously I believe it will be favourable. I don't say that from a partisan point of view, but there was only one developed country that stayed out of the worst global recession since the Great Depression - that was Australia under the guidance of Kevin Rudd.

And there are other achievements such as health reform, pension increases and I could go on with a very long list. But I think in 10 years time that will be regarded as one of the great achievements of the post-war era.

KING: Dr Craig Emerson, look forward to talking to you next week.

EMERSON: Thanks Madonna. Thanks George.

BRANDIS: Thank you Craig.

KING: And Senator George Brandis, see you next week.

BRANDIS: See you next week Madonna.